



Chris Sholly / Lebanon Daily News

Lebanon resident Tom Powers (right) shows a montage of wildlife he has photographed in Stony Creek Valley to Tom McKinne during a media event held at Fort Indiantown Gap's firing range yesterday. The two men are members of a new coalition formed to fight a Pennsylvania National Guard-proposed land swap involving wilderness tracts in northern Lebanon and Dauphin counties.

## Group opposes land-swap plan

By CHRIS SHOLLY  
Staff Writer

FORT INDIANTOWN GAP — On the cold, snow-covered firing range at Fort Indiantown Gap yesterday morning, a newly formed coalition of sportsmen and outdoor enthusiasts shot its first volley against a proposed land deal.

"We saved the (Stony) Valley 25 years ago," Dale Ibberson said. "And it looks like we're going to have to save the valley again."

Ibberson, along with more than a dozen others from Lebanon and Dauphin counties, braved the freezing temperatures and biting winds to

talk to the media about a land swap proposed by the Pennsylvania National Guard. They fear the change would restrict their access to the game lands.

If the deal goes through, the Guard would purchase about 2,100 acres around DeHart Reservoir on the south side of Route 325 in upper Dauphin County, land now owned by the Harrisburg City Authority, and then swap it for about 2,100 acres of state Game Lands 211, which is owned by the Pennsylvania Game Commission.

The 7-mile-long, half-mile-wide strip of land under consideration is

adjacent to the Gap's northern boundary on Second Mountain. The tract's northern boundary is the foot of the mountain's north face, about 55 yards south of Stony Creek; the eastern boundary is Cold Spring Road in Lebanon County; the western boundary is Middle Paxton Township, Dauphin County.

Both tracts are part of a vast, forested region in Lebanon, Dauphin and Schuylkill counties known as St. Anthony's Wilderness.

The deal would allow the Guard to expand the size of the installation —

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# Group opposes land swap

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the second-largest military training facility in the nation — to create a buffer zone for future firing ranges along the Gap's northern border.

The Guard already has held two public meetings on its proposal, one in May and another in September.

Lt. Col. Chris Cleaver, public-affairs officer for the Guard, said military officials have listened to the concerns of local residents and "continue to formulate a proposal that is amenable to everyone."

However, the new group — Coalition to Save Stony Valley — is gearing up to fight the proposal, first announced in May. Hunters, hikers and other outdoors enthusiasts are worried that access to their favorite game lands and trails may become more restricted under the proposal and fear the land may be developed commercially someday.

"We're concerned that we might lose some more of our beloved valley," said Ibberston, who fought to save the Stony Valley in the 1970s.

Joan Renninger, Hershey, is a lifelong resident of the area who has spent many hours hunting, fishing, hiking and bird watching in the Stony Valley.

"One of my concerns is that a future garrison commander can do whatever he wants to do," she said. "In this age of base closures, what happens (to the area) in the future if the base is closed? I think it's atrocious that after the fight in the '70s that we have to go through this again."

In the mid-1960s, the Game Commission and PP&L proposed swapping 1,700 acres of Stony Valley property in return for 5,500 acres of PP&L land in the Clarks Valley, Dauphin County. PP&L wanted to build a pump-storage system on the land.

Local groups fought the swap for more than a decade. In 1980, Gov. Dick Thornburgh signed legislation that secured the area under the federal Scenic River Protection Act.

Other coalition members believe the swap will adversely affect the valley's environment.

"People have to understand how important it is that these large areas of unbroken woodland remain that way," Lebanon County's Tom McKinne said. "There are lots of species and animals that need large tracts of land that are unbroken. Our concern is that it will fall apart if this (land) gets developed in any way."

Tom Powers shared that concern. During the gathering yesterday, the Lebanon man showed a poster of wildlife photos, animals he said he has seen in the Stony Valley on his hikes.

"I just love nature," he said. "This is a living museum. In the future, young people aren't going to have a place to go (if the area is lost). It's a special, special area."

Cleaver said the swap would have no environmental impact on Stony Creek, the Rails-to-Trails property or the Appalachian Trail, which meanders through the area. He emphasized that the land would be used strictly as a buffer and pointed out that the military installation has spent millions to enhance the wildlife habitat on the land it owns.

McKinne said most people are willing to take the military at its word but still worry what will happen in the future.

"I think the biggest concern is that we have no control over what's going to happen 10 years from now, 15 years from now, 20 years from now," he said. "I don't think it's really a short-term issue. People want to give them the benefit of the doubt, but there's no guarantee."

Military officials say there are proposed plans to build a \$15.8 million multipurpose training range at the Gap. To do that, they need the additional land as a buffer in case shells fly into the game lands. There have been a few cases of errant shells landing along trails in the Stony Valley.

As the group gathered on the roadside near the firing range yesterday, artillery could be heard in the distance.

Larry Herr, a farmer whose Union Township property borders the military base, said military officials

have said the range is needed to help train soldiers fighting in Iraq.

"If I thought this would shorten the war by one day or save one life, I would not be here," Hess said. "They want this side of the mountain as a buffer. In the meantime, their ordnance is going beyond that (mountain)."

Cleaver said Gap officials want to reach a middle ground with those who oppose the swap.

After the public hearings last year, Gap officials added to the deal 430 acres of land, known as ECHO-1 along Manada Creek and owned by the military facility. In a letter to the Game Commission in November, Pennsylvania Adjutant General Jessica Wright told the commission the National Guard would agree to certain terms and conditions that were raised by local residents, including a condition barring future development of the land and no new roads on the site.

"There are a number of benefits to this proposal," Cleaver said, pointing out that hunting and other outdoor recreational activities would continue.

Gap officials also have said the deal would be good for the local economy because it would bring more federal dollars to the facility, keeping it economically viable for the future.

Jerry Feaser, a spokesman for the Game Commission, said the agency has not discussed the proposal formally, although it is taking comments from residents. The commission, however, is expected to schedule public hearings on the proposal before it takes action, though none is planned yet.

Members of the Coalition to Save Stony Creek plan to attend the Game Commission's next meeting at its headquarters in Harrisburg at 1 p.m. Sunday.

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